

GENDER FROM THE GROUND UP: EQUALITY AND THE METASEMANTICS OF ‘WOMAN’

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Trans/Feminist Philosophy Conference

1. STARTING POINT: TRANS MEANING CRAFTING

Mira Bellwether, *Fucking Trans Women (FTW)*:¹

“There are a few principles at the heart of this zine. One of them is that we benefit from sharing knowledge. Another is that the form of someone’s body doesn’t necessarily determine what that body means, how it works, or what it can do. That is to say that just because what’s in my crotch *looks* like a penis doesn’t necessarily mean that it *works* like a penis. In point of fact it doesn’t, at least not most of the time.” (p. 2, my emphasis)

“Being asked to fuck someone with my penis as a cock generally puts me off, and sometimes enough that I get angry or upset. I don’t understand the desire. Or I do, but I’m defiant: why ask for the smaller, unreliable, and most importantly uncooperative cock when there are plenty of dildos available? When I try to force the issue on my penis she is even more defiant: she basically crosses her arms as well, and things get difficult and annoying.” (p. 34)

“I knew early on that while I was into fucking someone with a cock, my penis was only into occasional cock-being. The rest of the time it would rather be a clit, and for the most part that’s how I treat her . . . [except] every so often she wants to get into penis-drag and fuck someone’s mouth, cunt, or asshole. In that way, we’re well-matched: I also enjoy occasional boy-drag. I think for both my penis and myself, the part that feels gross is the coercive *assumption* that because we look like we do, we should want to behave masculinely all of the time.” (p. 33, my emphasis)

Ana Valens (on Twitter @acvalens):

“Our society thinks a penis is inherently masculine, penetrative, and male. That isn’t true. Just because a girl has a dick doesn’t mean she’s going to insert it into something. It’s better to think about trans women’s dicks as *women’s* genitals. A cis man will have a very different relationship with his junk than a trans woman on HRT.” (her emphasis)²

“Trans women with vaginas have genitals that function similarly to cis women’s, whereas trans women’s penises on HRT are much more analogous to an enormous version of a cis woman’s clitoris. In the latter’s case, our crotches require a soft, smooth touch based on using one’s fingertips.”³

“Outside of ‘girldick,’ ‘clit,’ and ‘outie,’ there’s a long list of words that non-op trans girls draw on to describe their privates, including gender-neutral terms like ‘strapless’ and ‘junk.’ On the other hand, some trans women love using ‘dick’ and ‘cock,’ which is perfectly fine too.”⁴

1. Tragically, Mira passed away in the early hours of December 25, 2022. Digital copies of her zines are still on sale at <http://fuckingtranswomen.org>. Proceeds go to her chosen family.

2. Ana Valens, “Trans/Sex: Here’s What You Need to Know before Having Sex with a Trans Woman,” *Cashmere*, March 22, 2019, <https://cashmeremag.com/trans-sex-myths-sex-552811>.

3. Ana Valens, “Sex with Trans Women 101: A Guide for Queer Cis Women,” *Allure*, July 10, 2019, <https://www.allure.com/story/guide-to-sex-with-trans-women-for-cis-women>.

4. Ana Valens, “Trans/Sex: From ‘Girldick’ to ‘Clit,’ What Trans Women Call Their Genitalia,” *Cashmere*, December 26, 2018, <https://cashmeremag.com/trans-sex-genitalia-girldick-505208>.

I call *trans meaning crafting* the creative, collaborative practice by which trans people come to invent and reinvent interpretations of our bodies that for the first time make genuine sense of our lived genders and gender realities on our own terms.

- a) Elsewhere, I defend an analysis of *trans meaning crafting* as a distinctively trans feminist approach to the metaphysics of gender, on the model of inference to the best explanation—following Bellwether, a *sexy mad scientist metaphysics*, if you will.⁵

“I also believe that one of the best tools we have at our disposal for figuring out our bodies, for learning about them and coming to delight in them, is experience. . . . I’m talking about starting from data and working toward conclusions rather than the opposite; something very much like sexy mad science (white lab coats and leather gloves optional.)” (*FTW*, p. 2)

“I needed a word to directly identify the sensitive, fleshy tube of flesh with all the nerves and blood vessels in it. Not everybody uses the same word for this part of their body. I mostly call mine my clit, for instance, but at different times it can be different things. When I am at the doctor’s office the word I use is also penis, but not because I believe that’s the *right* word for it.” (*FTW*, p. 14, my emphasis)

- b) On the realization that trans people’s gender practices are constitutive of what gender *is* rather than separate from it, trans people’s own interpretations of our bodies and genders come out as *metaphysically*—not just politically—privileged for the straightforward reason that they best track and explain social reality for us.

“So, when [the leatherdyke conference] Powersurge defined a woman as someone who could slam her dick into a drawer without hurting it, a common response among some butch leatherdykes and some ftms was to say that it sure would hurt if their dicks got slammed into a drawer; a dildo may not be a dick only in the conception, it may be a dick *phenomenologically* as well.” (Hale, “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies,” p. 230, my emphasis)

“I discovered Kate Bornstein, and ordered a copy of *My Gender Workbook* from America. I felt as nervous as if I had ordered porn through the mail. When it arrived, I could barely stand to open it, despite how desperate I was to learn what was inside. It was the old naming magic: I knew that, once I had the words, I wouldn’t be able to escape the fact of what I was. . . . Not that I had a category I could slot myself into, but that I finally had the key to unlock all that I needed to tell about myself, and a tool with which to craft my future. I found a T-shirt that said “gender free” and wore it with great pride, alongside my Doc Martens, black suits, and heavy eyeliner. . . . I’m sure I’ll collect more words in the end, and look forward to watching them change and evolve in turn.” (Lester, *Trans like Me*, pp. 33–34)

2. MY PROJECT HERE: GENDER FROM THE GROUND UP

My aim: I want to further explore a trans feminist approach to gender along the following lines:

- a) *Gender-first*: Gender is explanatorily prior to gender identity (“Euthyphro’s Gender Problem”).⁶
- b) *Trans-first*: The metaphysics of gender is better served by starting from trans people’s genders.
- c) *Metaphysics-first*: As an empirical and explanatory desideratum, trans feminist theory should vindicate *trans meaning crafting* as a bona fide metaphysics of gender.

5. For more, see my “On Our Own Terms: Trans Women Crafting the Meaning of ‘Woman’” (manuscript).

6. I argue for the gender-first view in “Is Euthyphro a Man Because He Identifies as a Man?” (manuscript) – come by at next year’s online APA Central!

Analogy to androcentrism:

“Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself.” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 5)

“Think about it like those anatomy models in medical school. A male body is the human body; all those *extra* things women have are studied in ob/gyn. It truly is a situation in which more is less.” (MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 34, my emphasis)

“She was so elaborately and ostentatiously a female body that she seemed scarcely to be a human being.” (Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, p. 213)

Trans-inclusive feminism vs. (radical!!) trans feminism: Just as the dominant social definition of humanity takes men as its implicit reference point, even the explicitly trans-inclusive feminist accounts of gender currently on offer take cis people’s genders as their implicit reference point.

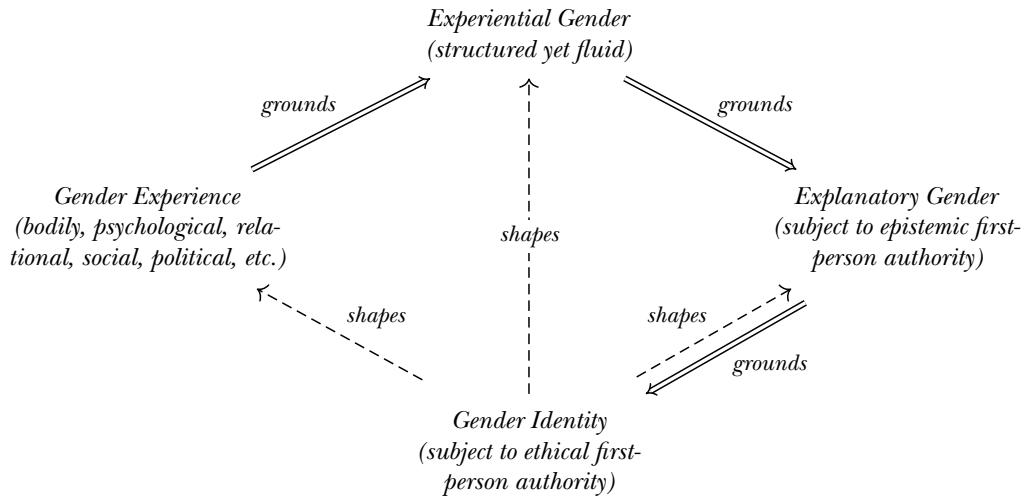
Trans-inclusive feminist accounts of gender begin with what being a (wo)man means to cis (wo)men within dominant social relations and cultural spaces, construct from that dominant meaning an analysis that ensures all or most cis (wo)men will be (wo)men, and then tag on gender identity in order to retrofit trans people awkwardly into existing cis-centric frameworks.

A trans feminist account of gender seeks a story told by trans people to other trans people for each other, without necessarily taking cis people’s genders for granted; it is *gender on our own terms*.⁷

“From margin to center” (*hooks/Crenshaw*): Just as an analysis of gender discrimination that begins with what being a woman means to Black women incorporates rather than marginalizes white women’s relationship to womanhood, an account of womanhood that begins with what being a woman means to trans women incorporates rather than marginalizes cis women’s relationship to womanhood.

3. THE BUILDING BRICK THEORY OF GENDER, OR HOW GENDER IS JUST LIKE LEGOS

My view: The positive view I want to propose is a version of what I think of as the *building brick theory* now under development in trans feminist philosophy (cf. Bell, “Being Your Best Self,” forthcoming).



7. See my “Pregnant Persons as a Gender Category: A Trans Feminist Analysis of Pregnancy Discrimination,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, forthcoming.